

PHILIP A. CHESTER (1896-1976)

Philip A. Chester, former head of the Hudson's Bay Company in North America, who died in Winnipeg on 23 August, 1976 at the age of 80, was a founder of the Arctic Institute of North America and a member of its original Board of Governors. He was a firm believer in the importance of scientific research in the North and his Company was the first to support the new Institute financially. He took his responsibilities as a Board member seriously, providing wise counsel to its early officers and assistance to its members working in the field, at a time when government services in the North were few and far between.

His remarkable career with the Hudson's Bay Company has often been compared with that of Sir George Simpson, of whom Professor A. S. Morton wrote: "In the history of the Hudson's Bay Company he is the central figure not only in his own time, but in the whole long story. He strode into office and set a tempo of management such as had never been known and he maintained the pace almost to the end of his days".

Philip Chester came to Canada in 1924, following service throughout the First World War and training as a chartered accountant. The Company's affairs were then at a low ebb, a situation not unlike that a century before following amalgamation with the Nor'west Company. Simpson began his work in the eighteen twenties, becoming Governor-in-Chief in Canada in 1830 and remaining very much in charge for the next thirty five years. Philip Chester was originally sent by the Company in London to examine operations in Canada and suggest what should be done. His comprehensive survey and incisive recommendations led to his being put in charge of the much-needed reconstruction. Appointed General Manager in 1930, he remained in charge for the next thirty years. Only those familiar with the Company in the nineteen twenties can appreciate the astonishing changes he brought about. Working his way unit by unit, he directed modernization and expansion of the Company, eventually reforming even the 275-year-old fur trade. As one who worked with him at that time wrote on his retirement:

"We will always remember the energy, the

forceful and relentless drive, the exacting standards of performance, the frequent and thorough tours of inspection, and last, but not least, the criticisms of his articulate tongue." Proud though he always was of the Company's long traditions (he was a firm supporter of the modernized magazine *The Beaver* and urged the writing of Douglas MacKay's *The Honourable Company*), he saw to it that good merchandizing came first. "You cannot", he once said, "sell groceries on history". When *The Beaver* once appeared in all its colourful glory with an Arctic campsite picture on its cover, including a large can of a competitor's coffee right up front, there was nowhere to hide from his wrath, even in the Company's broad domain.

Recognizing that modernization of the fur trade depended for its success on transportation and communication, Philip Chester introduced the use of Company aircraft at a time when there were no aids to navigation and precious few maps. He equipped the trading posts with radio and employed progressive architects to design buildings suited to the special problems of northern construction. He cared very much for the welfare of his employees and provided better housing, special fringe benefits, and such humanizing touches as prizes for the best post gardens. Young Canadian apprentices were recruited for the first time, and the personnel, wherever they might be, soon understood that Mr. Chester not only required good performance but also took a direct interest in them.

The Hudson's Bay Company was not alone in changing with the times. Reform of northern government was also on the way, though slower in getting started and uncertain in its direction. When in the nineteen fifties education, health, housing, transportation, and much more were at last acknowledged to be public responsibilities, the old Company did not, as it might well have done, stand in the way of change. When the history of the Canadian North in the present century comes to be written, the name of Philip Chester of the Hudson's Bay Company will stand high among those who led in reforming its administration and improving the conditions of those who live there.

Trevor Lloyd